



# The History of Jews in Opatów

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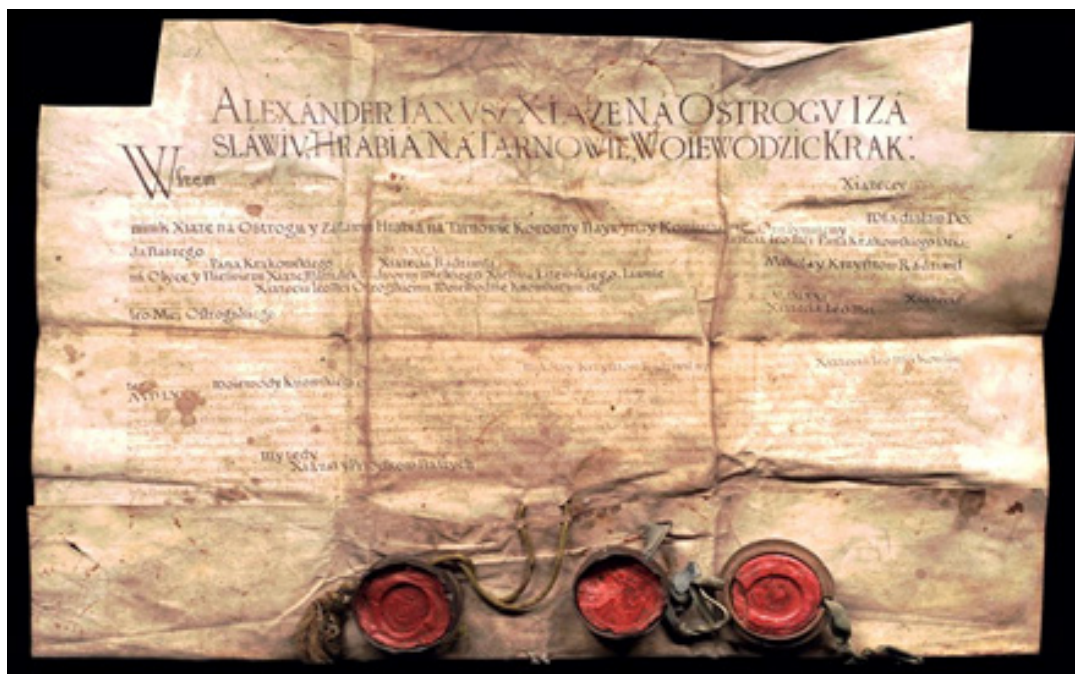
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# THE HISTORY OF JEWS IN OPATÓW

## 1 The beginnings of Jews' settlement in Opatów

Opatów, a town located at the foot of the Świętokrzyskie Mountains, developed most intensely at the beginning of the XVIth century, when the Great Chancellor of the Crown Krzysztof Szydłowiecki was its owner. Its rapid development made the name Magna Opatoviensis (the Great Opatów) popular in the country. And this was the moment when the Jews started settling in the town as well as Greeks, Armenians, Scots and Englishmen. Opatów used to be the first town in the Sandomierski Province, where Jews settled down. The rich rented alcohol factories while the poor ran small pubs. The oldest mentions came from 1538 when the first four Jewish families were registered. Other references about the Jews from Opatów date from 29th May 1571: "as Jews they gave the proof that they had always had freedom in the town of Opatów". This privilege was confirmed in 1575 by Prince Konstanty Ostrogski and later in 1579 by the next owners of Opatów. According to these privileges the Jews had the right to build a synagogue and houses, to trade, slaughter their cattle and run taverns. They were also obliged to pay taxes and rent to the owner of the town.

Władysław Fudalewski, who is the author of the Opatów monograph, writes that the first mentions about capitular books came from 1612.



Picture 1: The Privilege for the Opatów Jews given by Prince Aleksander Janusz Ostrogski in the XVIth century



Picture 2: The XVIth - century synagogue on Żydowska Street (Szeroka Street at present) destroyed in 1944

In the second half of the XVIth century Opatów was the biggest cluster of people of Mosaisc faith in the Sandomierski Province and one of the main kahals of Lesser Poland.

On 30th September 1633 the Jews received the privilege from Władysław Dominik on Ostrog and Zasław according to which they were able to "freely build their synagogue, school and hospital, as well as houses to live in". At the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries Opatów kahal was created. At that time Opatów was so important that it became the capital of the whole group of smaller kahals such as Sandomierz, Kolbuszowa, Tarnów, Klimontów, Ożarów, Baranów, Mielec, Sokółów, Ostrowiec, Denków, Rudnik, Dzików, IwaniskaiĆmielów. At the same time a Jewish necropolis was built.

In 1634 the town was divided into two parts: the Jewish (known as Żydowska Street) and the Christian section and this division lasted up to World War II. The traveler Johanna Philippa de Carosi in the book „Reisen durch verschiedene polnische Provinzen, mineralogischen und anderen Inhalts” writes:



*"In Żydowska Street in Opatów there are small wooden houses, there are so many Jews here. They do not only deal with trade but they are also in close relations with other provinces in the country. Some of them visit houses selling, fancy goods and other items. I met Jews from Opatów in different provinces of Poland. When a traveler comes to Opatów, they are simply surrounded by several dozens of the Jews who thrust their goods upon them. When they are thrown out through the door, they push their goods through the windows. One can buy both foreign and national goods and they specialize in fur business."*

In 1662, 711 Christians and 266 Jews were registered and it was the biggest number in the Sandomierski Province. According to the census list from the 17th century, the number increased to 2034 Jews including those living in Opatów kahal which was 57 villages and 4 towns.

## **2 XVIIth – XIXth centuries - Opatów Judaica**

In the middle of the XVIIth century, the Swedish invasions and conflicts with Muscovy took place which resulted in casualties and the loss of estate. Fejbisz, the son of Natan from Feitl from Vienna wrote in his record that the Jewish community consisted of "200 affluent families, all of them were brutally murdered", obviously by the Swedish. The Jews were able to come back and rebuild their houses after the peace treaty in Oliwa in 1655. In Opatów there used to take place conventions of regional councils, which was costly for the Opatów kahal as the inhabitants had to provide the marshal of the council with different goods in order to avoid attacks on Jewish properties. The Jews also paid levy in the interest of their school and church (the so-called kozubales) to avoid vandal excesses. It is also known that there was an argument between Szymon Zelewski, the Opatów canon, and the Jewish community concerning destroying a Jewish monument at the cemetery. It was a revenge taken on the Jews who had organized a street market in the Market Square on Good Friday. Eventually, the priest was sentenced to three months of retreat in the Cloister near Bodzentyn.

In the first half of the XVIIth century Opatów developed as a commercial town, especially that merchants were mainly of Jewish origin. Jakub Nosson stood out among Jewish merchants. He visited Cracow, Lublin, Lviv and in the customs records of Cracow his name can be also found with the names of merchants going to Silesia and the Czech Republic. He was a trading partner of Jew Aharon from Prague whom he sent furs, leather and wax bringing to Opatów Moravian wine, cloth and jewellery in turn. Also Jeremiasz Lewko and Mojżesz Markowicz took their goods to Prague in the first half of the XVIIth century. The names of Opatów Jews are often found in the customs records of Cracow on the way from Wrocław to Lviv, Jarosław and Rzeszów as well as from Cracow to Lublin. In Lublin merchants from Opatów bought mainly wax and leather and in Lviv fish and "Turkish goods". It was quite common for Opatów merchants to keep in contact with merchants from Toruń, Gdańsk and Cracow.

At the end of the XVIIth century conflicts between people of Christian and Mosaic faith were quite often to be found. In 1689 Jews were falsely accused of violating Catholic religion. In order to avoid spreading the conflict kahal paid Opatów chapter 1000 Polish zlotys and from that moment it became an annual duty of the kahal.

Until the XIXth century due to dense, wooden buildings there were a lot of fires in Opatów, especially in the Jewish part.

In winter 1714, Żydowska street was destroyed in a fire. The Jews had to look for shelter in nearby villages. After this event the Opatów kahal issued a proclamation forbidding the Jews to build houses or shops on the Polish street or Christian Market Square as the fire had destroyed the whole estate. The Żydowska street was to be rebuilt, the position of kahal strengthened and each house was to be built only in Żydowska street. However, after some time the street was populated to such an extent that there was not enough space for newcomers. In 1755 there were 1675 Jews in Opatów.

According to the census list from 1787, for the Cracow parish there were 2024 Catholics and 635 Jews in town. It is known that the number of the Jews is inaccurate because the number of the houses occupied by the Jews was bigger than those occupied by the Catholics.

In the XVIIIth century the Jewish community consisted of 6 towns: Opatów, Ćmielów, Denków, Koprzywnica, Nowa Słupia, Łagów and 87 villages of Sandomierski Province. A serious problem of the Opatów kahal was finances so on 20th August 1759 Antoni Lubomierski issued a briefnote which was supposed to prevent it. It stated that the expenses and input of the kahal were to be controlled on behalf of the town owner by the Opatów governor. Apart from the financial crisis and the fires, the main signs of the crisis of the Opatów kahal were attacks of students, taxes, numerous complaints and judicial trials concerning not paying off debts.

### **3 Important Jews from Opatów**

A lot of notable rabbis came from the Opatów kahal. The town used to be the seat of a local rabbi twice. Between 1590 and 1640 Moses, the son of Abraham from Przemyśl, held this position. He was the author of quite a few theological works. He died in 1606 in Opatów. And for the second time in 1696, R. Saul (later the rabbi of Cracow) the son of Heszl, became the Opatów rabbi.

Numerous works written by Opatów rabbis play an important role in deepening Talmudic knowledge. In the second half of the XVIth century Samuel, the son of Eleazar, was born. His father, a preacher, was known for his charitable and scholastic activity. Samuel Opatokower, born in Opatów in 1640, graduated from a medical university in Germany and worked as a doctor in our town. In his old age he moved to Ottense near Altona, where he occupied himself with literary work. In the times of August II and August III Samuel from Opatów, who was a printmaker and a seal producer, became a royal servitor while Pejsak Chaimowicz from Opatów became a royal factor. It must be emphasized that the titles of a servitor or a factor were the greatest distinctions that Jews could receive from the king. Other famous Jews were the zaddik Abraham Jehoszua Heszal (1765-1825) and the mathematician Gabryel Jehuda Lichtenfeld.

### **4 The life and traditions of Opatów Jews**

As mentioned before, Opatów was divided into two parts: A Jewish and Christian section. Jewish life was concentrated in two places a) in a synagogue and b) at home. Each Jew attended the synagogue twice a day and after the prayer they had discussions about matters connected with the town. The Kahal chamber was situated in a separate building with all the Kahal institutions. Next to this building there was a hospital where the sick, the poor and the homeless lived. In the Kahal house there was also a Jewish prison for debtors, thieves and for those who broke ritual rules or opposed the authority of the seniors. But it was home that Jews appreciated most.

Cheating, profligacy and divorces were very rare. Both men and women were employed in shops or inns having Saturday and holidays free. On those days all the trade and craft deals were suspended. Men and married women spent their time in prayer houses and after that a festive dinner was held. Having had a short nap, the master of the house studied the Bible or the Talmud, whereas women read so called „Women Bible” or stories about wonders or miraculous events.

Parents put a great emphasis on the children's upbringing, boys attended schools and girls were taught at homes. Having a rabbi as a son was the parents' highest aspiration. In Opatów there was a famous „jesziba” (klojs – an orthodox school for boys) where eminent rabbis taught so the boys had the opportunity to study on a high level. Due to this fact many country-famous rabbis were connected with Opatów.

The Jewish community in Opatów generated a completely different cultural life and manner. Specific traditions, clothes, upbringing, weddings and funerals created a wide gap between the Jewish and Christian boroughs.



Picture 3: How to make a brush (Kirshenblatt Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, p.163)

In the XIXth century Opatów was still one of the biggest and most important Jewish communities. The statistics show that at that time there were from 2,5 to 2,9 thousand Jews only in town, which was 60% of all the inhabitants of Opatów. There were a synagogue, a cemetery and a prayer house.



Picture 4 *The Ropemaker* (Kirshenblatt Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, p.92)

In the first half of the XIXth century the situation of Jews living in Poland divided by Russia, Prussia and Austria was different according to the specific country's policy. Not only was the Russian annexationist against the Jews' assimilation but also further restrictions were imposed. This, however, did not prevent some Jews from taking part in patriotic manifestations just before the outbreak of the January Uprising. The economic transformations taking place in big cities did not happen in smaller towns like Opatów where the Jews created particular economic communions involving all the local inhabitants in different forms of manufacture. A good example was Jakub Reifman (1814 – 1895) a self-taught scholar, critic and a writer who was born in Łagów. At his early years he, together with his parents, moved to Opatów where his father was a teacher in a Jewish school.





Picture 5: Yom Kippur Eve (Kirshenblatt Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, S.54)



Picture 6: Purim Play: „The Kraków Wedding“ (Kirshenblatt Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, p.34)



Picture 7: Shakhres: Morning Prayers in Lower Besmedresh (Kirshenblatt Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, p.64)



Picture: The Hunchback's Wedding (Kirshenblatt Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, p.324)



## 5 The history of the Opatów Jews in the XXth century

During the twenty years of the inter-war period the source of money for the Jews was trade and craft. According to historians, there were 6441 Jews living in Opatów in 1925. At that time there were two synagogues in the region (in Opatów and Ćmielów) and 19 prayer houses. The whole small industry was in the hands of Jews – the brickyard by the Kania river, the water mill on the levee, the mill at Łagowska St. (the property of Israel Rozenberg). Lubensztain had a huge wood store at Sandomierska St. The Jews held the positions of doctors, lawyers, bakers, shoemakers, tradesmen of furs, grain, food and they were also the landlords of the tenement houses.



Picture 8: *Brush Factory* (Kirshenblatt-Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, p. 162)

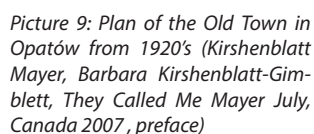
In Opatów the Jews had their schools and sports club called „Makabi.” The wealthiest Jew in the town was Lejzor Mandelbaum – the owner of the chemical plant „Kantoria” which comprised the soap and candle plant at Legionów St. and the technical oils plant at Kilińskiego St. Mandelbaum was also the owner of two tenement houses at the market square. Another wealthy tradesman of horses, Kiwa Milberg, bought a manor house in Nikisiałka.

In almost every Jewish house there were a lot of books. In 1915 the Syjonist Organisation founded a library in Opatów. During the years 1924-1926 there was the so called “press movement” started by a local teacher of Hebrew and religion, Naftuła Jakubowicz. In 1924 he issued an anniversary leaflet in the memory of Teodor Herzl - “Opatower Her-cbłat.” Then he published a few issues of newspapers: “Opatower Cajtung” (1924), “Opa-tower Wochcnbłat ” (1924) and “ Chow Tamuz” 1924 and “Opter Sztyrne” (The Voice of Opatów) which was published for two years. Famous theatre troops from Warsaw, Łódź or Lublin visited Opatów and the local klezmerim Arisz Lusting accompanied them. Also, the wife of I. L. Perec, the local maskil came from Opatów.

In a small town of Opatów the music culture was blooming, the founder of one of the local musical families Arisz Lusting composed religious melodies. Jews from Opatów had especially vivid memories of festive celebrations of “ the Renewal of the Sun” which, once in twenty-eight years, was placed in a specific configuration and in 1925, eight days before the holiday of Pesach, it was celebrated in a particularly festive manner. On this

The foremost activists of the Jewish community management in the 30s were: Moses Wajsblum, Izrael Rozenberg, Szmul Zalcman, Majer Wajsblum, Szmu Perelmuteri Jan-kiel Feldman. In the community council there were: Lejzor Zajfman, Szmul Urbinder, Chaim Wercman, Moszek Milgrom, Chaim Weiss, Nusyn Bromberg I Fiszel Malicki. Between 1938-1939 the management of the council was dominated by the Zionists. Both General Zionists and Revolutionary Zionists had 24% of influences, the Orthodox and Aguda's followers - 18%; and the mizrarchists and those not belonging to any political party - 8%. The position of the government rabbi was occupied by one of Aguda's supporters Szulim Peczenic AKA Rokach. There were also three Vice Rabbis (Podrabin): Mordka Dawid Bonhart, Lipman Majer Dychtward - who were regarded members of Aguda party and Abram Josef Zajman - a Zionist - who additionally performed religious service in Cmielów.

At the end of the 30s many Jewish families left Poland, looking for jobs abroad. In 1934 also eighteen-year-old Mayer Kirshenblatt together with his family left and settled in Toronto. At the end of his life, encouraged by his family, he started to paint memories from his childhood which he spent in Opatów. He painted about 300 pictures which have become a valuable source of knowledge concerning pre-war Opatów.



The outbreak of the World War II started the most difficult period for Jewish people. Some families escaped to the areas taken over by the Russians at the beginning of the war. The remaining area was under German occupation. At the beginning of the war the Germans burnt the Opatów market square and deported more than 200 people. In 1940 all the schools and both Polish and Jewish organisations were closed down. The Jews were deprived of their factories and valuables, and since the spring 1941 they were assembled in ghetto and were forbidden to leave it. Wąska, Szeroka (Berk Joselewicz Street), Starowałowa and Zatylna Streets were turned into a ghetto on the basis of the District Head order.



The side entrances to the streets were fenced with a high hoarding. At the ghetto borders there were also boards forbidding Jews to leave it and the Polish to enter the area. The Jewish council (Judenrat) was located in Mr Płodowski's house. And at the cemetery not only the dead and Jews murdered by the Nazis were buried, but it was also the place where executions were conducted.

The Head of Judenrat was Mosze Wajsbium, and then Majer Zejfmán. To keep peace in the ghetto, a special police was organized. It consisted of young Jews in uniforms equipped with rubber batons. In spite of prohibitions, the Poles kept in contact with the Jewish people, providing them with groceries.

The liquidation of the ghetto in Opatów took place on October 20th, 1942. At night the area was surrounded by the troops and at dawn a special division consisting of the German and Ukrainians entered the ghetto.

The Jews were evicted from their densely inhabited flats and were not allowed to take anything, and then they were driven to the point on the market where animals were sold. At that time Opatów was inhabited by about 7000 Jews. From that place the queues of people were moving along Sandomierska and Ożarowska Street in the direction of Adamów and Brzezine up to Jasice, where they were put in a freight train and taken to the concentration camp in Treblinka. The fragment from the account of a person marching to Jasice: "During our walk some elderly or sick people dropped out from time to time, because they couldn't keep up with the group. They were hurrying us with smacking and curses. We were crowded in a terrible way. We were bundled for 120 people in a railway carriage for transporting animals"



Picture 7: Expulsion from Opatów 1942: Execution of My Grandad and Family (Kirshenblatt Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, p. 170)

Nowadays in Opatów some traces of Jewish life can still be found, for example there is the building of the ancient mikvah (today it is a fudge factory), a Jewish school at Szeroka Street and a few matzevas in the area of the former necropolis. However, the most beautiful trace of Jewish life in Opatów are pictures painted by Meyer Kirshenblatt, which let us discover how this town looked in the old days and enriched the history of their stay there. At the moment the majority of Jews having their roots in Opatów live in Israel, the USA, Canada and Brasil.





Picture: Boy with Hering (Kirschenblatt Mayer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July*, Canada 2007, p.6)



If you want to follow the routs of Mayer Kirshenblatt you should have a walk through Opatów. You will find a lot of informations about the Jewish community and a different picture of the Jewish community in pre-war time painted by Mayer Kirshenblatt in the book „They called me Mayer July.“





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